

A little dance of joy

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When I lived in Adelaide, we had few friends at first but a college friend moved down to work in the same industry. He and his wife had no family in Adelaide so when their baby was born, I got to babysit. Oh, how lovely it was to walk the floor and sing lullabies to a small creature who smelled sooo good. As she grew older, we used to sit on the floor and play games. Every now and then she would jump up and run out the back door and do a little dance of joy – just for being alive. After a few seconds, she'd run back in and plop back to the floor and continue to play. She would be back before I could get up. It was just amazing to watch.

Imagine the freedom of a 3-year-old to just be popping with joyjust because.

I believe joy is different from happiness. For a start – joy is not the opposite of sadness. It *is* something different.

We have a whole commercial industry selling us happiness. If you buy this thing or if you wear this dress...but it is a fleeting thing, isn't it? Take this course; self-actualise, go vegan: They all guarantee happiness. Sadly, what they unintentionally do is make people wonder what's wrong with us. Why aren't we 'happy'? In the real world – this is not only not possible but downright unhealthy. I see my Millennial grandchildren crushing themselves into Kardashian look-alikes believing that's what boys want and that will make them happy. Feminist Granny keeps her mouth shut...again.

To be honest, being happy all the time would have ruined my writing career. It would have blinded me to the tiny wonders of the world. Being sad makes me slow down – and think. It also makes the highlights – *highlights*. Life **is** up and down and without that it would be very bland indeed.

So, if happiness is like a jumper all over us and taken on and off – joy is something else. Joy leaps from the centre of us, unexpected. Joy leaves a vapour – a trail.

You can be happy the baby is born but there is nothing like the joy of holding this magic infant minutes old. It leaps, it flows.

You can be happy and at peace on the water but the exhilaration and joy when the wind fills the sails or the fish bite. That's something else.

But only a little girl has the freedom to do her wee welcome dance. We are so restrained as grownups. Strangled by our grown-up-ness - Joy is left to leak out in tears.

This week, I watched waiting family's in airports heady with anticipation for loved ones to arrive...

...and to meet their new grandbabies.

Anticipation – oh Advent. The tears of joy were everywhere. Joy leaping out like fresh spring water.

Isaiah builds anticipation. He has been anointed to proclaim the good news to the poor. He was sent to bind the broken-hearted ...and to anoint those in grief with the oil of joy. You can hear much of Jesus' gospel is drawn from this passage. Good news to the poor. Comfort and joy to those in sorrow.

Our readings, ask us to time shift, again. Both readings point to the One who is coming but John the Baptist is referring to Jesus the adult. Not the nativity story. Past, present and future all blend in Advent readings.

So, who is John the Baptist?

Is he a prophet? – he says not. Is he Elijah? He says 'no' but he quotes Isaiah in response. He was never a disciple yet he recognises the One to come. And he knows Jesus is the One.

They are cousins. There is love and respect between them but John never travelled with Jesus.

Some say he was the bridge, the bridge between the old and the new. He is the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, pointing the way but not being of, or like, the people he baptised. He chose to stay in the desert – the wilderness. He stayed on the edge. He knew God. He remained a guide until his death.

John, the signpost, speaks the dreams of both the psalmist and Isaiah. Restore us as you have restored before. Dream this future instead of bitter sleep. Bring us now into another season. Rachel Hackenberg says¹, "a dream can heal the past"; "a prophesy can secure the future".

¹ *Draw near*: 2020 Advent- Christmastide Devotional, StillSpeaking Writers Group, UCC USA

Advent is that time between. It marks the past, it rests on the future and asks us to sit in this liminal space: Not yet reaping – not yet sowing. Wouldn't we rather be singing carols? Wouldn't we rather skip to the future?

But then, that little girl is in late 30s now. I would have missed it all.

John the Baptist has another important role.

John's proclamation of Jesus as one who is unknown² challenges the church (not just this church but all churches) for arrogant presumptions that *it (that particular church)* knows Jesus. Each church owns the measure of the man and the meaning. So each paints a different portrait, the judge, the saviour, the miracle man, revolutionary leader, salvation, spiritual guru and more. Each of these understandings, like the understandings revealed in the Gospels is but a facet, at best, a corner of some complicated stained glass representing something bigger – a larger story. It is arrogant to assume we own God.

As we anticipate the birth of the baby Jesus, we are dreaming a future, prophesising from the past, merging time old and new. The Christmas baby will shortly become the one who challenges authority; teaches in bewildering parables; overthrows the status quo; and eventually becomes a thorn in the side of authorities and the centre of our faith.

As we peer into the distant hills: the stories -

In the in-between time...

Something happens in the heart, it leaps.

Rachel Hackenberg prayed: *Miraculous God, unbound God, healing God – let me not lose hope that the past can be healed, let me not be afraid that the future is unknown, let me not believe that the present is without a harvest. Amen*³

² Texts for preaching, Brueggemann, Coursar et al p30

³ *Draw near*: 2020 Advent- Christmastide Devotional, StillSpeaking Writers Group, UCC USA p.19